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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of prior learning assessment in the life long learning of adults in the United States. The introduction stresses the increasing importance of life long learning in American society. The second section reviews prior learning and its assessment. Prior learning is formally defined as learning which has been acquired through non-academic life and work experience. Prior learning assessment is defined as a system of evaluating and granting college credit to adults who can articulate and document that they have achieved the objectives of a given course or set of competencies. The third section reviews the three basic approaches used to award credit for prior learning. The first approach most commonly uses standardized tests produced by either Educational Testing Services (ETS) or American College Testing Services (ACT). The second approach uses challenge examinations developed by the American Council on Education (ACE). The third approach uses a portfolio, a formal document produced by the individual being assessed which details learning acquired through non-college experiences. The final section discusses in general terms how prior learning assessment can help facilitate interest and commitment to life long learning. Contains 12 references. (JDI)

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Prior Learning Assessment: U.S. Experience Facilitating Lifelong Learning

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In: Lifelong Learning: Policies, Practices, and Programs

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Prior Learning Assessment: U.S. Experience Facilitating Lifelong Learning

by Carolyn M. Mann

Traditional lock-step education and training excludes many learners from the lifelong learning continuum, particularly those who are older or who come from disadvantaged groups, and at the same time further entrenches a costly and time consuming method for upgrading skills and qualifications within a workforce. By way of contrast, prior learning assessment is an effective tool for ensuring that duplication in training and education is absent or at least minimized. It is also an excellent resource for adult learners to assess their learning needs, review their commitment to upgrading, and clearly identify the resources that will be required. In addition, faculty who become involved in prior learning assessment activities are strongly challenged to review their methods and approaches to education. This paper argues that of the three main techniques for prior learning assessment, portfolio development and review is the most appropriate. For APEC member economies, with their ever growing needs for an up-to-date and highly skilled human resource base, the advantages of effective and wide spread prior learning assessment programs are substantial.

INTRODUCTION

Linear notions of education as they apply to the development of a workforce are outdated. The days of educating only the young are passé. Growth and development in an environment characterized by rapid change requires people who understand the importance of information, and who use that information to construct knowledge, think creatively and function productively (Cross, 1991).

Employers no longer want workers who simply come to the job on time and do what they are told when they are told. Today, an unskilled low-wage workforce has limited advantages in a global environment. What is required by employers are workers who are thinkers and learners, and for this reason today's workplace increasingly emphasizes lifelong learning. Various reports suggest that highly desired skills include the abilities to read, write, compute, communicate, manage personal issues, adapt, work in groups, influence others and, perhaps most importantly, learn. Managers need to be able to engineer innovation and lead others during times of uncertainty, to find creative solutions to problems that arise from change, and to facilitate their own and their employees' learning in order to keep abreast of current trends and information (see for example Marsick, 1988).

In fact, successful organizations will require individuals to do more than adapt, change and learn new skills. Workers must become self-reflective and critical of what they learn, how they learn, and why they learn. As well, they must assume more responsibility and control over how their learning activities are structured. Marsick (1988) suggests that a new organizational model is emerging, one that demands the following characteristics:

- the integration of personal development and technical or vocational development;
- a focus on group as well as individual learning;
- a concern for critical reflection, for problem setting, as well as for problem solving;
- an emphasis on informal learning;
- an organizational model which functions as a learning system.

The key theme is one of being able to manage and master learning throughout the lifespan.

There is a strong and well documented connection between investment in education and training and its influence on the availability of qualified manpower which, in turn, leads to stronger economic growth and development. In this day and age, with rapid technological change and increased competition of a global nature, learning throughout the lifespan has become a critical component of workforce development. Just as important is the need to ensure that training is not duplicated or unnecessarily repetitive. Economies where training is done once in an effective, appropriate and well documented fashion, have a distinct advantage. Prior learning assessment is a critical tool in the documenting process, and hence a key asset in support of lifelong learning processes.

The ongoing development of APEC's human resource base is not a task to be left strictly to the education and training community nor to the business or industrial communities. It requires the creation of strong, effective links between these communities in order to develop learning packages that respond in a timely and effective fashion to workers' needs throughout the lifespan. Prior learning assessment programs serve as one of these critical links, encouraging adult learners to build on learning from a variety of recognized, non-collegiate experiences and providing them with a means for accessing specialized, higher technical and vocational education.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

In North America, prior learning is the term used to describe learning which has been acquired through non-academic life and work experience, typically in advance of formal contact with a college or university. Prior learning is the learning that adults often want recognized in the form of college credit toward academic degrees or other credentials. As well, prior learning may be used to gain entry into higher

level training without first enroling in preparatory or prerequisite courses.

Interest in prior learning assessment was spurred by the acknowledgment some decades ago that learning activities are not planned and delivered solely by educational institutions. Allen Tough's (1967) ground breaking study alerted educators to the depth and breadth of learning activities in which adults typically participate. For example, this study found that 90% of adults are involved in at least one learning activity annually, and the average learner conducts five learning activities per year with an investment averaging 100 hours per learning effort. In addition, 80% of all learning projects are initiated by the learner, not by institutions, and adults are often involved in a variety of learning activities which are not sponsored or directed by higher education. Though these findings may seem somewhat dated in the context of the 90's, a time when we have come to accept much of the lifelong context associated with today's adult learners, the importance of learner-initiated, learner-driven, and non-institutional learning should not be taken for granted.

The variety of learning activities undertaken by adults is endless, and many organizations, whose primary function is something other than education, are directly involved in the business of supplying learning experiences. Business and industry, as well as not-for-profit and governmental agencies, spend billions of dollars annually on training. Cross (1991) states that in the United States only one-third of organized learning opportunities are delivered by institutions of higher education. The remaining two-thirds are provided by a vast array of other "schools" and non-college providers, offering courses for both professional development and personal fulfilment.

Prior learning assessment is a system of evaluating and granting college credits to adults who can articulate and document that they have achieved the objectives of a given course or set of competencies. The rationale supporting prior learning assessment rests on the notions that knowledge is valid regardless of the source and that most learning occurs outside the walls of higher education. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) early validation study documented the fact that college-level learning can and does occur outside of a college classroom, and, more importantly, there are valid and reliable ways to evaluate this learning for college credit (see Willingham & Associates, 1976). Numerous colleges and universities have confirmed and supported this finding by helping thousands of adults to receive recognition for college-level learning and continue their studies in order to complete academic degrees.

One of the major misconceptions associated with prior learning assessment is that it is recognition of prior *experience*. In fact, a focus on experience suggests nothing more than time on task and in no way guarantees that learning took place. To merely record that an individual worked as a purchasing agent or as a small business owner for three years documents only the time. The intention of prior learning assessment is to take the process a step further and to explore what the person learned from the experience about purchasing, business ownership or management. What skills and knowledge were acquired? Are the competencies equivalent to competencies achieved in courses offered at colleges and universities?

Academic evaluation of prior learning shifts the focus to the learner and the

learning, and away from where the learning occurred or how long it took. While the rationale is simple and easy enough for faculty and administrators to conceptualize, implementation of prior learning assessment raises difficult but interesting questions about teaching and learning. Clearly, learning is not an isolated event. It takes place within a complex context of people, policies, procedures and structures, many of which have developed over a long period of time during which intellectual barriers and vested interests have become ingrained. Prior learning assessment challenges faculty notions of education and questions who should be in control of the learning process. It also brings into question the traditional faculty role of being central to the learning process as well as being the gatekeeper and bearer of all knowledge.

The most basic question regarding prior learning assessment is often asked by potential students as well as by the faculty: *Is the process worth the effort?* An individual who has owned his own business and managed 20 to 30 employees over a ten-year period may be quite knowledgeable in the areas of business ownership, management, finance and marketing. Another individual who has worked in the social services area may have learned about counselling, communications and how to work through a host of agencies in order to assist clients. Clearly, a great deal of learning has taken place, and demonstrable outcomes of these experiences can be articulated and documented. For adults learners, in most cases the benefits accruing from the investment of time in the process are well worth the effort. Adults don't want to replicate learning, and will often not bother with higher education if duplication is required in order to meet the needs of the institution. Thus, when presented with the alternatives of taking a class that repeats what is already known or of documenting skills and competencies, adult learners more often than not choose prior learning assessment.

In addition to granting academic recognition, prior learning assessment helps adult learners set realistic goals and develop educational plans. Students are given the opportunity to reflect on and assess their varying levels of expertise and calculate how these relate to overall degree plans, as well as determine how these plans will influence personal and career development. Self-esteem typically increases as adult learners receive concrete validation of their learning based on prior experiences, often beyond their expectations, and this in turn influences motivation. As well, students gain confidence in their ability as learners, and develop an increased appreciation of the value associated with lifelong learning.

In some circumstances, particularly where credit is given for portions of courses or programs, prior learning assessment enables faculty to make maximum use of what students have already learned and to build on that learning, linking classroom learning to real world experiences. Through this process, faculty gain a better perspective of the types of learning that occur in other organizations. In addition, the mechanisms for assessing prior learning require faculty to reflect on assumptions they hold with regard to teaching and learning, and often encourage them to make changes in course content, delivery and evaluation in order to create learning experiences which are more meaningful to the learners.

Students are attracted to institutions with prior learning assessment programs,

and they more often stay to complete their degrees at those institutions and return later to attend other courses in order to update their knowledge and skills. Business and industry are attracted to institutions with prior learning assessment programs because they see these programs as time considerate and responsive to the needs of adult learners, thus employees are more motivated to upgrade, learn on a regular basis, and pursue academic degrees. The process avoids duplication of learning efforts and enables organizations to make better use of their training dollars. In many cases, the relationships that develop between specific businesses and colleges through structured prior learning assessment programs and skill training have spun off other advantages, sometimes in the form of shared technology and courses delivered at work sites. The results tend to be mutually beneficial, an effective foundation for all partnerships.

METHODS

In the United States there are three basic approaches commonly used to award credit for prior learning: tests, evaluation of non-college sponsored training, and assessment of individualized portfolios (see Miller and Daloz, 1987). Testing remains the principal method used by colleges and universities, and a CAEL sponsored survey of educational institutions found that 76% of the responding institutions awarded credit for standardized tests. By contrast, this same survey found that only 42% of responding institutions awarded credit through comprehensive assessment of prior learning from life and work experiences by portfolio assessment (Fugate, 1991).

Tests and Non-College Sponsored Training

Two types of examinations are typically used to evaluate prior learning: standardized examinations, and proficiency/challenge examinations. Standardized tests in a limited number of different subject areas have been developed and marketed by such groups as the Educational Testing Services (ETS) and the American College Testing Services (ACT). The examinations are prepared by a committee of experts, and test results are compared against traditional college courses to develop normative scores. In some prior learning assessment environments, college and university faculty prepare proficiency examinations for their own courses which students can then challenge in order to receive academic credit. These examinations have the advantage of expanding the subject areas available to students, and they also allow individual faculty members to be more directly involved in the preparation of the test and the evaluation of individuals.

As an alternative to standardized tests and faculty developed challenge examinations, the American Council on Education (ACE) has, since 1945, evaluated military training and made recommendations for appropriate college credit. In 1976, ACE expanded this process to include the evaluation of other non-college sponsored, ongoing training programs. These recommendations are published for colleges and universities to consider when awarding college credit. ACE evaluations are conducted by teams of faculty drawn from a variety of institutions. The variables used to ascertain recommended college credits include the intended learning outcomes, the length of training time, the levels of training complexity, and the assessment

methods employed to evaluate achievement of learning outcomes.

These are difficulties associated with non-college sponsored training and testing. For example, ACE program evaluations do not have universal utility for students interested in prior learning assessment since not all students have been in the military nor have they all participated in a program evaluated by ACE. The cost of program evaluations by ACE must be covered by the organization whose training is being evaluated, and as a result not all organizations can afford to participate. Prior learning is not always easily categorized into a traditional subject area, and as a result standardized tests may not fit with student learning. Even when prior learning can be related to a specific subject area, such as drafting, there may not be a standardized test or challenge examination available. Testing is in fact a very conventional classroom tool. When used for prior learning assessment it reflects a traditional technique being imposed on a non-traditional learner, the result often creating incongruence between the subject and the learner (Knapp, 1975; Simosko, 1988).

Portfolio Assessment

Neither testing nor non-college sponsored training assessments provide mechanisms for helping adult learners to evaluate their own learning and to develop plans for enhancing or building upon previous knowledge. Many colleges and universities have, however, developed a third approach, a portfolio process which can be used as a basis for awarding credit for non-college learning. While less widely used, Miller & Daloz (1987) describe the portfolio process as offering both methodological and educational advantages over the other two methods. Advising and assisting the learners to identify college-level learning and determining how such learning relates to overall degree plans are crucial components of a portfolio process. In addition, portfolio evaluation provides a more holistic approach for prior learning assessment than is the case with standardized tests and program evaluation. The portfolio process focuses on the identification and articulation of learning as well as the measurement and evaluation of the learning. Standardized examinations and ACE program evaluations, by comparison, focus only on measurement and evaluation of prior learning. Standardized tests and program evaluations may, however, be incorporated into the portfolio process, allowing individuals and institutions to take advantage of the strengths of all three methods.

A portfolio for prior learning assessment is a formal document which details learning acquired through non-college experiences. It is used as the basis for requesting college recognition based on experiential learning. Typically, a portfolio includes the following elements (see Mann, 1993, p. 5):

- a life history or autobiography which profiles the most important events in a person's life;
- a chronological record which provides a year-by-year list of experiences since graduation from high school;
- a goals paper which describes the person's personal, career, and educational goals;
- a narrative, sometimes referred to as a competency, which includes concise state-

ments of life experience and of the learning that resulted from these experiences;

- documents which substantiate a person's learning experiences.

The "portfolio" represents more than a physical document. Perhaps more importantly it reflects the process of identifying, articulating and documenting non-college learning (Knapp, 1975; Simosko, 1988; Willingham, 1976).

> *The preparation of this portfolio is an exercise in self-evaluation, introspection, analysis, and synthesis. It is an educational experience in itself. It requires you to relate your past learning experiences to your own educational goals, to exhibit critical self-analysis, and to demonstrate your ability to organize documentation in a clear, concise manner.* (Mann, 1993, p. 4).

Preparing a prior learning portfolio is not an easy task, nor can it be done quickly. In fact, a learner should not be asked nor expected to do so without careful consideration of the educational value of the process, the commitment required for effective completion, and reflection on how the process directly relates to the achievement of academic goals. The preparation of a portfolio should not be an isolated event, but instead it is most beneficial when integrated into the overall framework of academic goals. Inappropriately, some faculty evaluators may want to recognize prior learning merely as a means to give credit for elective hours, or as a basis to waive requirements for one concentration while expecting learners to take more courses in another area. This type of approach does not honour the basic rationale for prior learning assessment. The development of a portfolio and its subsequent evaluation needs to be a full partner in the individual's educational program, and the process should directly enhance the value of the overall educational experience.

Most institutions that use a portfolio for prior learning assessment provide a *Portfolio Development* workshop or credit course in order to assist students with the process. While developing a portfolio, students are assessing their own learning, most often with the assistance of a faculty member, and in turn they develop a better understanding of how their learning relates to an academic degree. During the process they identify their strengths and weaknesses, and how the college curriculum can help redress weaknesses while capitalizing on strengths.

Portfolio development and assessment is also a learning experience for faculty, requiring them to be actively involved in the entire process. Prior learning assessment can't take place until faculty articulate standards for evaluating prior learning, and colleges and universities must formally define what constitutes college-level learning and publish the criteria and standards for students' use. Shelton and Armistead (1989) argue that the definition of college-level learning will vary according to the mission and educational philosophy of the institution, but that in general it will be learning that typically falls within a domain considered appropriate for higher education, and learners will understand both theory and skill components, recognize appropriate methods of inquiry for the discipline, and be able to apply knowledge beyond a specific context.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the research done on prior learning assessment, and the experience of many institutions during the past decade in particular, several issues continue to complicate the process. In particular, prior learning assessment is highly individualistic, non-routine, and will almost certainly continue to be this way in the future. This makes it time-consuming and expensive. Further, not all prior learning relates to an academic setting, nor is it easily categorized as college-level learning. This makes the conversion from life experience to college credit, at times, quite enigmatic. The supervision associated with prior learning ranges from fully independent experiences through to highly strategic, well planned and monitored learning. The former are most difficult to effectively document, while the latter, though potentially easier, are still challenging. To complicate matters, several years often pass before the learner petitions for assessment. This may make documentation difficult to compile.

Regardless of the challenges, the benefits clearly encourage both learners and institutions to participate in prior learning assessment activities, and not just in the United States. Activities related to prior learning assessment have recently been a focus of attention in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. In differing ways, each of these APEC members has implemented the concept of prior learning assessment to help adults obtain a range of learning experiences and associated credentials (see Cohen & Whitaker, 1994). New Zealand in particular has been heavily involved with the identification of competency and skill standards for various occupations and the awarding of certification based on these.

In the United States and elsewhere, prior learning assessment programs may be one of the most effective tools for providing access opportunities to individuals who have been denied opportunities for further education. Alienated from traditional learning systems, or simply unable to access them because of time, distance, finances, life stage or other factors, the disenfranchised have new hope for recognition of experience through the prior learning assessment context.

Further, and perhaps most importantly from a regional human resource perspective, the demands of industry can no longer tolerate the costs associated with lockstep re-training and upskilling when the need does not exist. For all learners to be forced through the same set of prerequisites and learning activities is terribly costly, for individuals, firms and the society at large, and is a major impediment to lifelong learning. Economic competition and personal development require the individualization that prior learning assessment fosters, and APEC member economies are well advised to consider regional programs for recognition of and accreditation for prior learning.

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